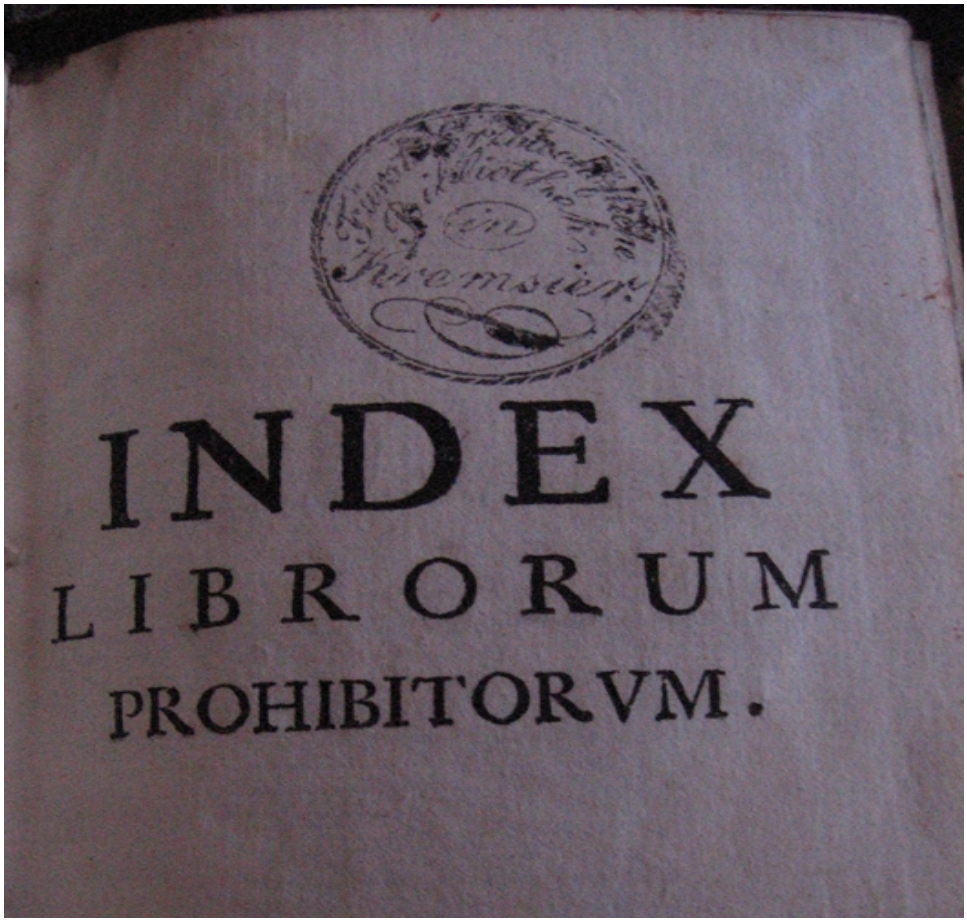
Index Librorum Prohibitorum:

The History, Philosophy, and Impact of the Index of Prohibited Books



David Dusto

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Introduction

For over a thousand years after its creation in the fourth century A.D., the Catholic Church wielded a level of control over information and writing that today is nearly inconceivable. With the collapse of the Roman Empire and the schism of the Church that divided the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths, the Catholic Church found itself in the unique position of having control over the creation and distribution of the written word. Painstakingly copied by monastic scribes, books were rare, prized possessions, and religious authorities had the final word on which books would be copied and which books would not.

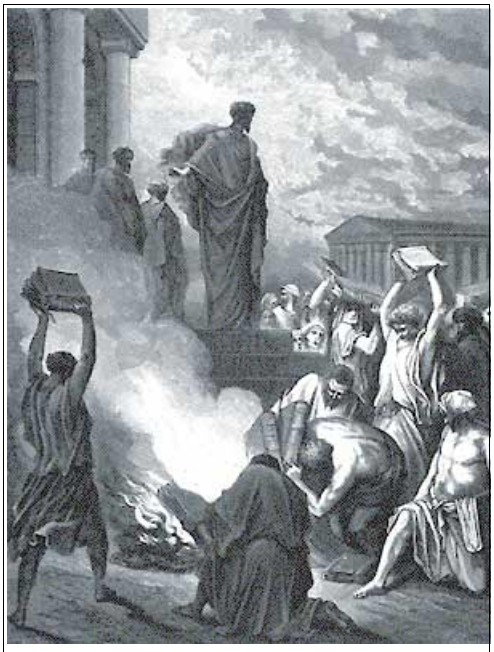
The invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, however, changed the way writing was produced. For the first time, books could be inexpensively mass-produced and could reach a far larger audience. No longer did the Church control which books were written, as anyone with money and access to a press could publish books without the consent of the Church. This became a major problem during the Protestant Reformation, when Protestant theologians used the printing press to widely distribute their works attacking the Catholic system. To the Church, such writings were heretical and potentially damning to the souls of faithful Catholics. What, then, could be done to stop the spread of heretical works?

For the Church, the answer to this problem was a list of books, the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the titles on which Catholics were forbidden to read without explicit permission from the Church authorities. The list banned not only individual books, but in many cases all of the books by a particular author or publisher. The *Index* was one of the most widely-implemented and successful examples of censorship ever devised. While a comparatively small number of titles and authors were

put on the Index compared to the number of books published, the self-censoring impact of the *Index* is incalculable.

This paper presents a history of the Index from its origins to its suppression in the twentieth century, along with an analysis of the philosophical and theological justifications that went into the Index. Finally, the legacy of the *Index* is presented in the form of modern attempts by the Church to suppress certain writers and their works.

A Brief History of Early Church Censorship



. Paul at Ephesus" by Gustave Doré

Although the official *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* did not appear until the sixteenth century, the origin of censorship in the Catholic Church can be traced back to biblical passages. In the Book of Acts, St. Paul converts many people in the city of Ephesus, who subsequently burn books filled with "superstitions" (Acts 19:19). This book-burning is approved by St. Paul and is said in Acts to be an example worthy of emulation. Biblical prohibitions against "heretical" teachers can also be found in the epistles (letters) of St. Paul to Timothy and Titus.

One of the first and most profound acts of Catholic censorship was the elimination of the so-called "Apocryphal" books, spiritual works considered holy by early Christians. Although a full history of the apocrypha can and has been the subject of many books, the end of the matter was that in 325 A.D., Emperor Constantine called a Church council which decided which books would belong in the official Bible (Hilgers, 1908, 2). The Council sorted out

which works were "inspired" by God and which works were not and therefore contained theological "errors". The books in error became known as the "apocrypha" and were vigorously suppressed by the Church, being branded with the title "*libri non recipiendi"*: books which were to on no account be be used.

The first actual catalog of prohibited writings by the Church appeared in a letter written in the year 405 by Pope Innocent I. The letter contained a list of accepted, canonical books, along with further "apocryphal" works condemned as "*non solum repudianda sed etiam damnanda"* (repudiated and causing damnation). The Decretum Gelasianum, attributed to Pope Gelasius I (492 – 496), consists of a list of canon works along with apocryphal works which are to be rejected (Davis, 1997, 1). The Decretum has been called the first "Roman Index" of prohibited books.

During the Middle Ages, Church censorship was chiefly concerned with works deemed heretical or superstitious, most notably the Talmud and other works of Jewish theology. Also suppressed were translations of the Bible not approved by the Church, although a general prohibition against translations was never issued (Hilgers, 1908, p.3). However, there was little need for a censorship listing such as the Index, because the Church had a large degree of control over books written throughout Europe, most of which were hand-copied by Catholic monks in monasteries. Only with the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1440 did the wide-scale publication of books outside of Church control become a very real possibility.

The perceived need for controlling what books Catholics were allowed to read became critical to the Church during the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther's 1517 declaration led to factional wars which split the Christian world into Catholics and multiple Protestant denominations, with their own, anti-Catholic philosophies. The sudden profusion in the printing of books promoting Protestant theology impelled Catholic leaders to suppress Protestant books, and ultimately led to the *Index*

Librorum Prohibitorum.

The First Indexes

The first appearances of Indexes listing prohibited books appear not in Rome for the Church as a whole, but rather as regional lists suppressing local books (Hilgers, 1908, p.3). These proto-Indexes initially appeared in the Netherlands (1529), Venice (1543), and Paris (1551).

Of particular interest to the history of the *Index* is the instance of censorship in Paris, which was promulgated by King Henri II of France as part of the "Edict of Châteaubriant" (Bosmajian, 2006, p.101). This Edict was a series of legal measures designed to suppress the spread and increasing influence of Protestants in France. Aside from implementing draconian punishments against Protestant heretics, fourteen of the forty-six articles in the Edict were concerned with censorship and control of the press. According to these articles:

- No book could be published in France unless it was first approved by the (Catholic) Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris. Furthermore, all booksellers were required to print the list of books prohibited by the Faculty alongside to list of books for sale in the shop.
- Inspectors from the Faculty were required to make twice-yearly inspections of every bookseller to ensure compliance.
- All shipments of books imported into France were to be unpacked in the presence of inspectors from the Faculty to confirm that no prohibited books were being brought into the country.

The first official *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* appeared in 1557, and was produced by the "Sacred Congregation of the Roman Inquisition" at the behest of Pope Paul IV (Dee & Sheridan, 2003, p.390). However, this first attempt at creating the Index was not approved by Paul IV, and was never published. The Inquisition produced a second, approved version in 1559, which contained works by

authors such as noted Protestant theologians Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as the works of King Henry VIII of England, once revered by the Church but later excommunicated for forming the Anglican Church. The 1559 *Index* also clearly laid out which Bible translations and versions of the New Testament were acceptable for use (Index, 1980, pp.28-30). The Islamic Koran and the Jewish Talmud were also on the list.

Although Paul IV approved the 1559 *Index*, it was unpopular with other Catholic leaders, who complained that the official *Index* was too restrictive (Dee & Sheridan, 2003, p.390). The problem was not so much with the actual titles listed on the *Index*, but rather that it specified the same punishments for owning or reading non-prohibited books that were written by any of the authors on the *Index*. For example, a person could be prosecuted for owning a book of pro-Catholic theological treaties written by Henry VIII before the Anglican Reformation, simply because Henry's latter works (which supported the Reformation) were placed on the *Index.* This restriction applied not only to all works by all authors on the Index, but also to all works, past, present, and future, published by any publisher whose books appeared on the *Index*! This had a (presumably unintended) ripple effect that resulted in the banning of almost all publishers in Europe.

With these overly-harsh restrictions in mind, the assembled clergy at the fourth and final session of the Council of Trent (1563) sought to revise Church legislation concerning the censorship of books. However, the Council was unable to come to any sort of conclusion on how to revise the *Index* and the rules that governed it, for two reasons: first, they lacked sufficient time; and second, doing so would discourage Protestants from attending the Council (whose legitimate grievances against Church abuses were acknowledged by Catholic leadership). Lacking a clear set of rules to control heretical publications, the Council ordered the creation of a commission to revise the *Index*, which completed its work in 1564 (Dee & Sheridan, 2003, 391).

The Modern Index


INDEX LIBRORVM
PROHIBITORVM,
CVM REGVLIS CONFECTIS
per Patres a Tridentina Synodo delectos,
auctoritate Sanctiss. D.N. Pij IIII,
Pont. Max. comprobatus.
VENETIIS, M. D. LXIIII.

Illustration 2: Title Page of the Tridentine Index (Espinosa, 1995, #51)

The work of the commission was ratified by Pope Pius IV on March 24, 1564, becoming the "Index of Pius IV" (Hilgers, 1908, p.4). However, of more importance than the actual titles on this new version of the *Index* were ten general rules that would govern censorship by the Church. Because there were ten rules, the new version is also known as the *Tridentine Index*. The first nine rules dealt with previously published works that were to be prohibited due to heretical teachings, while the final rule laid out the examination and censorship of future works. In addition, the rules prohibited books considered immoral or obscene, but exempted certain classic works (which, however, were prohibited from being used in teaching). The *Tridentine Index* would serve as the basis for all future Indexes for over three hundred years, until 1897. After the publication of the *Tridentine Index*, the list would be revised by the Church every few years; however, the basic rules approved by Pius IV would remain unchanged.

Pius IV also created an organization called the "Sacred Congregation of the Index", which was charged with overseeing the Index. Their principal tasks were the investigation of writings suspected of heresy, the regular updating of the Index, and to publish lists of corrections for books that were placed on the Index but which were not inherently damning if read; these books required a clause stating that the book was in need of correction. These corrections were published by the Congregation on a list known as the *Index Expurgatorius*. Books whose "errors" were listed on the *Index Expurgatorius* could be read by Catholics, but only if the passages determined by the Congregation to

be erroneous were first changed or deleted (Ross, 2006, p.71). For example, Copernicus' famous work On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres, in which he postulated a heliocentric solar system, was placed on the *Index Expurgatorius* when it was first published; Catholics were prohibited from reading the book until the "errors" had been corrected (Hatch, 2002, p.6).

Illustration 3: Strahov Monastery library vault (Dusto, 2008)

Books listed on the Index were not necessarily destroyed outright, and could still be read by Catholic scholars provided they acquired "a dispensation either from the Apostolic See or from some person specially authorized by the pope" (Hilgers, 1908, p.23). Existing books placed on the Index were often "quarantined" in special vaults or locked cabinets within libraries, examples of which can be seen over the doorways of the Strahov Monastery library in the Czech Republic, and in the hidden vault of the Kroměříž castle library. If a prohibited text was later removed from a revised edition of the *Index*, the book was removed from the vault.

Revisions to the Index

The first major revision to the *Index* was the *Sollicita ac Provida*, a papal bull issued in 1754 by Benedict XIV which created new, strict rules on how books were to be censored and how said censorship was to be enforced (Hilgers, 1908, pp.2-3). This bull was a response to criticism over the way books were added to the *Index* and their authors subsequently censored. The new rules made it far more difficult for a book or an author to be placed on the *Index*. For example, the bull stipulated that suspect books be examined by three non-partisan, expert scholars, whose identities were to remain anonymous from each other. Only if at least two of the scholars agreed that the book was heretical or

immoral would the title be passed on to a committee of Cardinals (high-ranking Church officials) for a final decision. Furthermore, Catholic authors of works which contained non-damning errors (and which were subject to be placed on the *Index Expurgatorious*) were now allowed to defend their works to the Congregation of the Sacred Index, or appoint an expert defender.

In addition, the bull corrected numerous typographical and grammatical errors which had built up over the past century. Although this may seem like a minor correction, it must be remembered that in the days prior to mass communication, small errors in something such as the *Index* could have major ramifications--for example, a writer having his books censored merely because another author has a similar name.

In the nineteenth century, the diminishing political and temporal power of the Catholic Church (most notably the absorption of the Papal States into Italy) led to a view of the *Index* among Catholic faithful as a reactionary embarrassment (Dee & Sheridan, 2003, p.391). For example, in 1870 the *Index* included the works of many popular writers such as Alexandre Dumas (author of *The Three Musketeers*), Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*), and Victor Hugo (*Les Miserables*). In 1870, bishops attending the First Vatican Council (Vatican I) requested a complete overhaul of the legislation that governed the *Index*.

Although the Council adjourned before this matter could be fully addressed, Pope Leo XII ordered the creation of a new constitution that would regulate the *Index*. This constitution, called the *Officiorum ac Munerum*, along with a new and revised *Index*, was issued in the year 1897 (Pope, 1987, p.1). Among the new rules of the *Officiorum ac Munerum* was a policy to gradually reduce the number of titles listed on the *Index* (and thus explicitly banned from being read by Catholics), and instead rely on general principles to guide Catholics in what they should and should not read. As a result, the number of books on the Index gradually fell. The Congregation of the Sacred Index was dissolved in

1917, and regulation of the *Index* passed to the Congregation of the Holy Office, under the direct control of the Vatican (Hilger, 1908, p.3).

The End of the Index

The final revision to the *Index* (the 32nd edition) was issued in 1948, and contained over 5,000 titles (Dee & Sheridan, 2003, p.391). However, actual use of the *Index* to outspokenly condemn writers had largely ended by this time, as there were many bishops at Vatican I who felt that the use and/or threat of the *Index* to silence or suppress intellectual inquiry deemed counter to Church teachings was in direct contradiction with the mission of the Church in the modern world. Still, although the *Index* was no longer being revised, works were still being placed on it as late as 1959, when Jean Stinemann's *La Vie de Jesus* became the last book added to the *Index*. The last book that was considered for prohibition was *The Religious Thought of Teilhard* by Henri de Lubac; however, this attempt was personally vetoed by Pope John XXIII.

The demise of the Index came during the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), which lasted from 1962-1965. This Council liberalized and modernized many aspects of the Catholic Church; for example, by allowing Church services to be performed in languages other than Latin. Further revisions to the *Index* (and thus, its very existence in Church law) were targeted for elimination. The chief proponent of retaining the Index was Cardinal Frings, the Archbishop of Cologne, who gave a speech pleading for a reform of the Church that would retain the *Index* (Dee & Sheridan, 2003, p.391). Interestingly, Cardinal Frings was assisted in writing this speech by Father Joseph Ratzinger, who was subsequently elected Pope in 2005, taking the name Benedict XVI. Despite the plea of Cardinal Frings, the Index would not survive. In 1966, further editions of the Index were ruled out by Cardinal Alfredo Ottavianni, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly known as the

Holy Office of the Inquisition, renamed during Vatican II).

In 1998, the Vatican opened to scholars its archives that concerned the *Index* (Jacke, 2005, p.1). German researchers have since been compiling a complete survey of all materials pertaining to the *Index* from its creation to its abolishment. This work is ongoing.

Philosophy of Church Censorship and the Index

It is easy to think of the Catholic Church as some sort of evil organization determined to suppress the truth and control the minds of its followers, like the Ministry of Truth in George Orwell's *1984*. To do so, however, is to ignore the underlying political and intellectual conflicts and concerns that accompanied the creation of the *Index*, its enforcement, and its revisions and abolishment. From its biblical origins discussed above, to its eventual elimination, the *Index* was viewed by the Church not as a method of restricting inquiry (although in practice it often was), but rather as a tool used by a parent (the Church) to protect its children (Catholics) from dangers that would imperil them.

As late as 1940, the preface to the *Index* makes it clear that "malicious publications" were thought of by the Church as originating from the Devil with the intention of "infecting" the faithful (Del Val, 1940, p.1). The same preface continues with:

"One must not claim that the condemnation of harmful books is a violation of freedom or a war against the Light of Truth, and that the index of forbidden books is a permanent attack against the progress of science and literature. Irreligious and immoral books are written in a seductive manner, often with themes which deal with fleshly passion, or themes that deceive the pride of the soul. These books are carefully written to make an impression and aim at gaining ground in both the heart and mind of the incautious reader.

In addition, the necessity to suppress malicious publications for the wellbeing of the public, has particularly been proven lately, when even civil governments, have used preventive censorship to protect the judicial system and public order, with a rigidity unknown to the Church. This shows us how well it corresponds with the true liberty. No matter how much true literary and scientific values a book can possess, it cannot legitimate the distribution which opposes the religion and good custom. On the contrary, the more subtle and seductive the evil is, the more it necessitates stronger and more efficient

suppression of it."

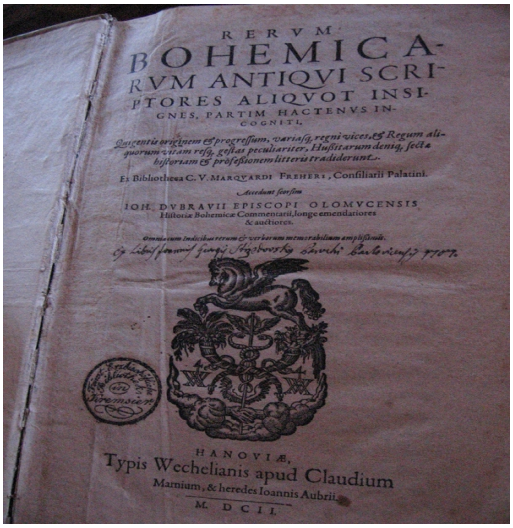
The above preface makes it clear that rather than viewing the existence of the *Index* as some sort of evil conspiracy by the Church against science, it would be more accurate to say that "malicious publications" were thought of by the Church as a diabolical conspiracy that needed to be purged. The justification for such action was deemed "the wellbeing of the public", and the suppression of books with the *Index* was thought of as less restrictive than the banning of books undertaken by individual governments, particularly those of Communist nations in the twentieth century.

In Harold Gardiner's Catholic Viewpoint on Censorship, the guiding philosophy behind the *Index* was the concept of "higher freedom", meaning that the faithful are allowed to do whatever they want unless specifically prohibited by law, much like the judicial assumption of "innocent until proven guilty". Hence, the restriction of materials that Catholics were allowed to read was seen as a way of granting them greater spiritual freedom by protecting from being "seduced" by dangerous thoughts and ideas in heretical texts (Gardiner, 1958, p.50). The prohibition of such texts was seen as an important duty of the Church, without which it would be failing its followers by not protecting them.

Furthermore, Gardiner makes the case that the number of titles on the *Index* constitutes only a tiny percentage of the total books ever published, claiming that this small number of prohibited texts demonstrates the restraint and care that Catholic censors used when considering the addition of a title to the Index (Gardiner, 1958, p.52). Of the roughly five thousand titles on the 1948 version of the *Index*, for example, two-thirds are technical and professional works which very few people were ever likely to come into contact with. Surprisingly, many of these works were actually written by priests, such as The Book of Secrets of Albertus Magnus, a collection of herbal remedies written by a monk circa 1250 (Ross, 2006, p.70). The concoctions in this book were later misconstrued as being magic potions,

prompting its addition to the *Index* in the sixteenth century.

Despite the high-minded justifications for censorship, political pressures inevitably played a large and increasing role in what books were placed on the *Index*. The entanglement of Church and state power in many cases led to overtly political titles being placed on the *Index*, titles which had little to do with immorality or attacks on the Catholic faith. For example, a history of Bohemia, the Rervm Bohemica Antiqvi Scriptores Aliqvot ... by Marqvardi Freheri (published in 1602), was placed on the *Index* not for attacking the Church, but rather because it advocated the independence of Bohemia from the (Catholic) Austro-Hungarian Empire. Likewise, The Prince by Machiavelli was placed in the Index in 1559 after it was blamed for widespread political corruption in France (Curry, 1999, p.5).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BOHEMICA-
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Ex Bibliotheca C. V. MARQVARDI FREHERI, Consiliarii Palatini.
IOH. DVBRAVII EPISCOPI OLOMVCENSIS
Historiæ Bohemicæ Commentarii, longe emendatiores
& auctiores.
HANOVIÆ,
Typis Wechelianis apud Claudium
Marnium, & heredes Ioannis Aubrii.
M. DCII.

Illustration 4: History of Bohemia (Dusto, 2008)

Aside from political books, other texts were placed on the *Index* because they clashed with the world-view held by the Church (and thus undercut the authority of the Bible as an unfailingly accurate document). As mentioned earlier, the 1616 edition of Copernicus' On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres was initially placed on the *Index Expurgatorius*. The 1664 version of the Index of Prohibited Books, approved by Pope Alexander VII, included a blanket prohibition for all books that promoted a heliocentric solar system (Heilbron, 1999, p.19). This prohibition would not be reversed until 1882, when the printing of heliocentric books was permitted in Rome.

Perhaps the best-known use of *Index* was what was later termed “The Galileo Affair”, in which the works of astronomer Galileo Galilei, which revealed his telescopic observations of satellites around

Jupiter, were suppressed by the Church. While often romanticized as the defining clash between science and religion, the conflict between the Church and Galileo had far more to do with politics than with science. After publicizing his discovery of Jovian satellites in his book The Starry Messenger (published in 1610), Galileo initially attracted strong, high-ranking supporters within the Church (Kusukawa, 1999, p.2). His most vocal patron was Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who defended Galileo in debates and was amenable to the view of a heliocentric universe. Galileo's troubles with the Church began in 1611 with his widely-circulated 'Letter to Grand Duchess Christina', in which he addressed the conflict between his own observations and the Bible (Kusukawa, 1999, p.3). In the letter, he declared that the Bible teaches how to go to heaven, but not how the heavens go--a statement not well-received by Church authorities.

When Copernicus' book On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres was placed on the *Index Expurgatorious* in 1616, it was widely perceived as an attack not against Copernicus, but against Galileo (MacLachlan, 1997, p.70). In the same year, Galileo was summoned to Rome to appear before the Inquisition, where he was cautioned against promoting the Copernican world-view. Sufficiently intimidated, Galileo avoided philosophical speculation for the next several years, instead concentrating on mathematics; his 1623 book The Assayer, which used mathematics to support his theories on comets, was dedicated to Cardinal Barberini (Kusukawa, 1999, p.3). The next year, Barberini was elected Pope and took the name Urban VIII, subsequently meeting with Galileo several times to discuss the latter's astronomical findings and theories, encouraging him to continue his research on heliocentricity as long as it was presented as a hypothesis.

The new Pope, however, was under tremendous political pressure. The Thirty-Years' War between Catholic and Protestant-aligned factions was going poorly, and Urban VIII was derided as “soft on heretics” in the way that modern politicians are sometimes accused as being soft on crime. A

strong supporter of Galileo on the papal staff came under suspicion of supporting the Pope's impeachment (MacLachlan, 1997, p.91). The end result of this pressure was that Galileo fell out of favor with his former Church patron.

Illustration 5: "Galileo before the Holy Office", by Joseph-Nicolas Robert-Fleury

In 1632, Galileo's new book Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems caused an uproar within the Church, as the book was seen as violating the injunction against promoting a heliocentric universe (MacLachLan, 1997, p.94). Six months after its publication, Dialogue was placed on the *Index* and Galileo was put on trial before the Inquisition in 1633, where he was convicted of heresy. In poor health and threatened with torture, he repudiated his belief in a heliocentric universe in a formal "abjuration", which was ordered read from pulpits across Italy (Holton, 2001, p179-180). Galileo would spend the rest of his life under house arrest. His Dialogue would remain on the Index until 1835, and a formal Church pardon and apology for his condemnation would not arrive until 1992 (Swisher, 2001, p.231).

In the century after Galileo's trial, a gradual and subtle shift occurred in what books were reviewed for the *Index:* according to the Rev. Hubert Wolf, a scholar who has studied the *Index*, after the trial "the Inquisition and Index mostly did not review scientific publications unless they clearly touched on theology, faith or the Bible" (Heneghan, 2005, p.2). As a result, highly controversial works such as Darwin's On the Origin of Species and the works of Marx and Freud were either never considered for placement on the *Index*, or no records of such consideration were kept.

Present Status of the Index

Today, the *Index* exists only as a historical document, and is no longer used to enforce literary and intellectual censorship (Dee & Sheridan, 2003, p.391). Still, the *Index* has never been explicitly condemned or repudiated by the Church. In the same 1966 document by Cardinal Ottavianni that suppressed the Index, "the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith...reaffirms that its Index retains its moral value" (Ottaviani, 1966, p.445).

Today, Catholics are expected to voluntarily avoid books that may weaken their faith or morals, but are not under the threat of excommunication, torture, censure, etc. for doing so (Jacke, 2005, p.2). Section 62 of The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*gaudum et spes*), promulgated during Vatican II, states that "let it be recognized that all the faithful, clerical and lay, possess a lawful freedom of inquiry and thought'' (Dee & Sheridan, 2003, p.390). The 1983 Code of Canon Law issued by the Church places responsibility for the moral welfare of Catholics in the hands of both bishops and laypersons. Bishops may issue an "admonitum", which is a warning to Catholics that a particular work may be morally corrupting or damaging to their faith.

An example of this kind of modern moral warning occurred in 2007, concerning the film The Golden Compass. Dr. Michael J. Fedewa, Superintendent of Catholic Formation and Education in the Diocese of Raleigh, sent a letter regarding this film to pastors, pastoral administrators and youth ministers within the Diocese (Fedewa, 2007). In the letter, he cautions that the book that the film is based on, Northern Lights by Phillip Pullman, contains ideas that can be construed as anti-Catholic and atheistic. Dr. Fedewa asks the recipients of the letter to inform parents of the "dangers" of the film and its associated novels, and to not take their children to see the film.

Another example of subtle Church opposition to novels perceived as spiritually harmful occurred in 2003, when Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), wrote a letter to Gabriel Kuby, a German Catholic who had fiercely criticized the Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling as corrupting young readers. In the letter, Ratzinger wrote, "It is good, that you enlighten people about Harry Potter, because those are subtle seductions, which act unnoticed and by this deeply distort Christianity in the soul, before it can grow properly" (Lawler, 2005, p.1). In that same letter, Ratzinger also praised Kuby for advertising the fact that Pope John Paul II did not voice his approval of the Harry Potter books as was widely believed; instead, the Pope's so-called approval originated from the misconstrued remarks of a Church presenter at a 2003 Vatican conference on the dangers of New Age spirituality.

Yet another example is the Catholic response to the novel and film The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown, in which a central plot element is a millennia-old conspiracy by the Church to suppress truth. In December 2003, Robert C. Morlino, the Bishop of Madison, Wisconsin, wrote a letter that was published in The Catholic Herald newsletter; in this letter, he raised “serious cautions about this book” and noted numerous contradictions between the religious details in the novel and those taught by the Catholic Church (despite the fact that the novel is a work of fiction). He denounced the book for its attack on the Catholic organization Opus Dei, and claimed that the book promoted “New Age” techniques. Morlino concluded his letter by urging faithful Catholics to not give the book to others as a gift, and if they had already done so, to admonish them of the “errors” in the book. Morlino's letter is only one example of the widespread Catholic response to The Da Vinci Code.

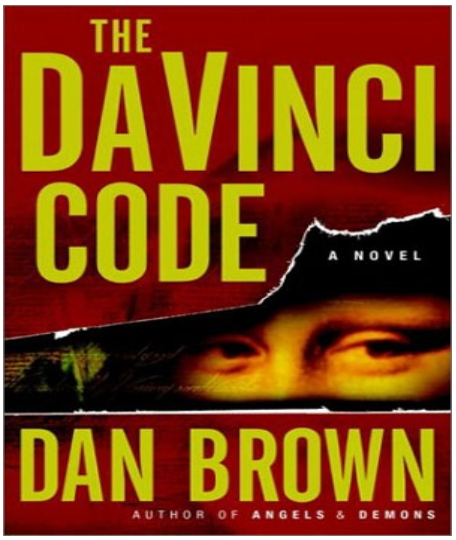

Illustration 6: Cover of The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown

While these modern attacks on novels and writers may seem harsh, it is important to remember that the above statements made by Catholic officials no longer carry the force of ecclesiastical law. No Catholic was expressly forbidden from seeing The Golden Compass or reading The Da Vinci Code, and barring a significant shift in Church policy, no Church official has the power to legally enforce the prohibition of a book or film.

Conclusion

From its inception, the *Index* had two purposes: to restrict what people could read (with the "good intention" of protecting their souls), and to prevent the publication and distribution of unauthorized materials from occurring in the first place. While one can evaluate how individual titles and authors (such as Galileo) were affected by the *Index*, the self-censorship resulting from *Index* is impossible to determine. Who can say how many scientists were intimidated by the *Index* into not publishing or advertising their findings? How many great works of literature were never realized, for fear of being declared "immoral" or politically inconvenient? While the Church justification for the *Index* seems vaguely high-minded at first glance--to protect their followers against the "dangers" of heretical or immoral works--it was doomed from the start. As the Bible used by the Church demonstrates in its story of Adam and Eve, it is often human nature to seek out exactly that which has been forbidden by authority. The softer "admonitions" used by Catholic leaders today, while often-misguided, are at least voluntary and make an attempt to explain why the work in question is supposedly perilous. Still, there's no such thing as bad publicity, and attempts by authorities such as the Church to prohibit media, however voluntary, may very well have the opposite effect.

Unfortunately, it seems that the Catholic Church is actually more progressive than many organizations that still try to censor books, as a quick look at the ALA's list of Challenged and Banned

Books demonstrates. Those who wish to censor information today, be it in the form of books, films, or internet sites, would do well to look at the history of the Index of Prohibited Books, the damage it caused, and its ultimate failure.

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